

Relational Perspectives:

A Visual Investigation Into Social and Cultural Relationships With Place

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Relational Perspectives:

A visual investigation into social and cultural relationships with place

Abstract

This project uses visual art to investigate the relationships between people and place. Here I investigate social engagement as a form of production within contemporary art practice and seek to expand on aspects of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and Hal Foster's essay on the 'Artist as Ethnographer'. While *Relational Aesthetics* discusses the capacity for artworks to explore connections between people, this project focuses on a *situational aesthetic* to investigate connections between people and place.

The project's concern with defining a *situational aesthetic* is informed by the practices of a number of contemporary artists who, working since the early 1990s, construct various narratives forms using temporal and spatial media such as film, video, installation and sound. These artists continue a lineage from earlier conceptual artists of the 1960s by using non-object-based forms to demonstrate an *active* relationship between artist and subject, a participatory relationship that is extended through the artwork to involve the viewer in constructing meaning. The project's theoretical foundation is based on critical theory by writers such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Hal Foster, Paul Arden, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau.

The six videos and installations that comprise the project exhibition seek to identify, describe and elaborate specific personal histories and events that bind people into communities and to place. The project's form and content have been shaped through research and personal experience with sites and situations specific to Tasmania. Methodologies including observation, interviewing and facilitated performance have been incorporated to expand documentary representation through video, sound and text installation. The videos and installations focus on viewer engagement and are produced as a result of extended research within a place(s) or situation(s) – in some cases over two years. Through a process of discursive engagement, I have collected stories, histories, experiences and information and filtered them into artworks. Each of the videos and installations translate actual conversations and stories into narrative structures that exist somewhere between fictional constructs and documentary observation – thus creating a space for viewer subjectivity and interpretation.

This project concludes that the connections that bind people to communities and to place are precarious, subjective and in constant change. Furthermore, these connections are expanded and multiplied through the artist's relationship to place and subject, and the subsequent relationship between viewer and artwork. The project identifies means to navigate these complex and changing circumstances by constructing situations, creating narrative fragmentation and by incorporating elements of fiction into the artwork. It argues that, by incorporating fictional devices within documentary form, the work can engage with a specific place or situation without resorting to social commentary or ethnographic documentation. Instead, the resulting work remains subjective and universal, allowing for connections to emerge with other places, people and situations.

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Introduction

Within this project I have explored relationships and connections between people and place via different narrative forms, including video sound and text-based installation. I investigated experiences of isolation, displacement, connection, belonging and memory specific to particular site and situations. Through literal and visual narrative forms, I present internal, psychological relationships between people and the external world. The artworks that comprise the project exhibition have been published at different stages throughout the candidacy and progressively refined for submission.

Early in the project I examined contemporary forms of production within visual art practice and the relational nature of much of this practice.¹ Questions about the artist's position in relation to their subject, the social implications of an artwork and the nature of collaborative practice started to arise early on in the research. These questions were gradually developed into a series of central research questions that subsequently provided a set of criteria from which I would assess individual artworks. The project exhibition brings together a selection of these artworks to demonstrate a consistent methodology and a conclusion to the central research questions.

I employed documentary approaches across different time-based media to make a series of artworks that elaborate and describe individual and community sense of place: each artwork in the project exhibition is created from encounters established with my subjects over periods of time.² These extended periods of engagement are an important aspect of the research and allow personal, psychological perspectives and experiences to emerge. The artworks included in the project exhibition and identified in chapter 2: The Project in Context are fluid, situational, conversational, performative and collaborative. Central to the documentary approach behind this research is Nicolas Bourriaud's definition of *Relational Aesthetics*, and

¹ Throughout the exegesis I discuss Nicolas Bourriaud's writing on *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002). I focus on relational practice that incorporates time-based media such as video and film. Even if the term 'new media' seems somewhat obsolete in this context, high quality digital video equipment and editing software is becoming more and more affordable. The size and affordability of this equipment results in greater portability and less obtrusive filming – giving artists the freedom to make work in isolated or distant places as well as allowing them to get closer to their subjects without the obtrusiveness of full-scale film equipment and film crews.

² The length and nature of these encounters varies with each project from several months to two years, they are reflected on individually in chapter 3: Research and Process. The length of this research project has afforded the opportunity to establish several long-term relationships and develop artworks with time for reflection and exchange.

Hal Foster's critical reflection on documentary methodology in his essay 'Artist as Ethnographer'.³

Relational Aesthetics provided a theoretical sounding board for identifying the nature of contemporary practice, especially practice which involves social engagement. Crucial to Bourriaud's theory is a questioning of artistic *form*; namely, he presents a compelling discussion about socially engaged and time-based practice, asking, 'What is a form that is essentially relational?'

*In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of "formations" rather than "forms". Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise.*⁴

Bourriaud extends on the concerns of earlier conceptual artists from the 1960s and 1970s. As Victor Burgin identified in the 1960s, many artistic practices of that time were changing focus from the material form of an artwork to the relationship between different materials, artworks, behaviours and experiences:

*Many recent attitudes to materials in art are based in an emerging awareness of the interdependence of all substances within the ecosystem of earth. The artist is apt to see himself not as a creator of new material forms but rather as a coordinator of existing forms, and may therefore choose to subtract materials from the environment. As art is being seen increasingly in terms of behavior so materials are being seen in terms simply of quantity rather than of quality.*⁵

This project continues a lineage of non-object based practice, where the works exhibited in the project exhibition and discussed in the contextual chapter evolve out of conversations and other forms of *encounter*. Although each work addresses different situations and contexts, their conversational form connects them in a narrative 'formation' where different stories intersect and merge. Through a process of discursive engagement, stories, histories, experiences and information are collected and filtered into artworks. Each of the videos and

³ Foster, Hal, 'Artist as Ethnographer', *Return to the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge: October Books, 1997

⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas, op.cit. p. 21

⁵ Burgin, Victor, 'Situational Aesthetics' (1969), 20 June 2007
< http://www.ubu.com/papers/burgin_situational.html>

installations in the project exhibition translate actual conversations and stories into narrative forms that exist somewhere between fictional constructs and documentary observation – creating a space for viewer subjectivity and interpretation.

Chapter 1: Project Description, identifies the aims, motivations and central research questions behind the project. This chapter provides a brief overview to the research by describing a background to the project, as well as the parameters of the research.

In chapter 2: The Project in Context, specific artists and artworks are discussed in relation to: *Partnerships and Participation*, *Real Fictions*, *Constructed Situations*, *the 'Other' and Ethical Obligations* and *Viewer Engagement*. This chapter describes how discursive engagement, experimental narrative forms and installation methods have expanded documentary forms into new areas of visual art practice. The structure of this chapter is informed by the central research questions identified in chapter 1.

Chapter 3: Research and Process, provides an in-depth description of the process and methodological approach behind the works included in the project exhibition. This chapter discusses the *Experimentation and Methodology* behind the research, the *Development of Individual Artworks* and the progressive *Exhibition and Presentation* of artworks throughout the research.

The final chapter provides a conclusion that summarises how the project has explored relationships between people and place through its specific research questions and aims. The conclusion discusses some of the ethical responsibilities of artists who incorporate other people's stories within their work, the function and use of social engagement and constructed situations within contemporary practice, and the relationship between viewer and artwork or exhibition. This chapter also describes the outcomes of the project and how this exploration has added to the field.